

Esther Josephine Morrison nee Free, 1910-2003

Something to call my own

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This is my attempt to record "oral history", things I have been told, things I remember (or mis-remember). It is largely not fact-checked (dates, names, etc.).

1 Esther Josephine Morrison née Free

1.1 A small kindness in a big family long remembered

When Grandma died, she still had a little doll-bed that one of her brothers had made for her out of a few scraps of wood and some nails.

She was born in 1910 in a small house outside of Jeffersonville, Ohio. She was one of the middle children of what would be a family of 11 kids. When she was born, her father's whereabouts were unknown. This always stuck with her. Shortly after that, they moved to a two room house near Austin, Ohio to (I'm guessing) be near her uncle Omar Free who had a farm and appears to have been somewhat more well off (there were stories of rides in his car c.a. 1920). I think Grandma was named for his wife "Hester".

Her father was back in the picture, and they added rooms to the small house, but growing up like that, there was very little you could call your own. That doll bed, and the act of kindness that it represented, were apparently precious to her.

1.2 Hard work at home and school

To hear her tell it, her mother favored the boys. As her older sisters (Nellie, Bess) got married, more of the job of helping her mother fell to her. She went to the brick one-room school house down the road and later Frankfort High School. She worked hard and excelled, becoming class valedictorian. Hard work and doing well at school where something she could call her own. Towards the end of her life, we visited the high school, soon to be torn down, and as we

drove away I heard her softly singing the alma matter to herself. Those were her glory days.

She was always driven to work hard, to do the right thing, and to do it well, which in her life meant a lot of housework, caring for family, and jobs caring for others. To go slightly Freudian, I think she never stopped trying to prove herself to a mother and father who never provided the affirmation she sought (possibly because they were just trying to keep food on the table).

Her brother Luther, next older, died when Grandma was very young. She thought he was hiding and went looking for him behind doors.

One of her best friends growing up was Laura Crago. In the it's a small world department we're almost certain she was related to Steph's adoptive grandmother Mary Benson nee Crago. I recently found out Laura's maiden name was Free, so probably a cousin of some sort, by marriage?

1.3 Morrisons, Marriage and Mother-in-Law

She worked for the Morrison after (during ?) high school, as my great grandmother moved into her 80s. Irnie's wife Ada (Rinkliff) [13-DEC-1893 to 16-OCT-1920] had died in childbirth, so the household was my great grandmother, Grandpa (43) and his older brother Irnie. Note, that had Ada not died, it's likely they would not have needed domestic help 9 years later, and this narrative would never have happened. Life.

Grandma began as a freshman at Willmington College in the fall of 1929. In October, Grandpa drove there, picked her up and they went to Maysville, KY and got married where the age of consent was lower. She was 19, he was 43. Early letters to her sisters were signed "Mrs. George L. Morrison", perhaps the custom of the time, but perhaps still seeking something to call her own (identity, social status)

When I asked her about why they got married her answer was "It seemed like the thing to do." She was also afraid that she would not be able to maintain her own high standards with college level work. And one alternative seemed to be returning home, which (inferring) was a situation she desperately wanted out of.

Of course once married, she picked up where she left off with domestic chores and caring for a mother-in-law who I infer was very proud in her own ways and (guessing) maybe not thrilled with the marriage of her son.

My great-grandmother had a cookbook/housekeeping guide that was dedicated to "The Pert Housewives of 1876" and contained a section on dealing with "the help" which consisted mostly in deriding "girls" (sic) as flighty, un-reliable, a bad influence and lazy. That was NOT Grandma. But it may have influenced her reception.

The story goes that one time Grandma was (obsessively I'm sure) cleaning the basement stairs in a dirty dug-out cellar under the house that was likely was impossible to keep clean, and my great grandmother said "Pa would never let me do that". Ouch. Still no approval.

1.4 "In a Kingdom By The Sea. . ."

Poetry was a lifelong love. Philip (1933) was named Philip Lee, after Poe's Anabell Lee. Mom (1936) was named Elaine, after Tennyson's "Elaine the lovable, Elaine the fair, Elaine the lily maid of Astalot." You could find solace in poetry, you could connect with worlds far away, with noble thoughts, tragedies and triumphs, and you didn't need anyone's approval.

She often recounted a story to me that someone once asked in an offhand way "What is life?", to which she replied (with gleam in her eye) by quoting (our "cousin Henry") Longfellow's "A Psalm of Life".

Tell me not in mournful numbers, 'life is but an empty dream', for
the soul is dead that slumbers, and things are not what they may
seem,

Life is real, life is earnest, and the grave is not it's goal, dust thou
art, to dust returneth, 'twas not spoken of the soul"

...

I've memorized that one too. She probably had hundreds memorized, at least in part. I have a poetry book in which she marked her favorites: "The Pert Chicken", "The Dash", "The Mighty Casey", "The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere", "'Ya Gotta Get a Glory (in the work you do)". . . .

1.5 Raising Kids in Hard Times

The great depression happened (the market crashed 2 weeks after their wedding). WWII happened. Philip and Mom were born. My great grandmother died. At this point (and this is interpretation) I think she *finally* had a life she could in some sense call her own. She was out of the crowded, poor conditions of her youth, she was now "the woman of the house" with two young children to raise and some status in the community/church. 4-H was a thing. County Fairs were a thing. The Dry Run United Methodist Church and (my memory) the annual chicken supper fund-raisers were a thing. If old school pictures are any indication, Mom and Philip were dressed neatly, in cloths Grandma likely made. In later years, her button box was a fascinating source of entertainment for young grandchildren. Laurel now has the foot-pump Singer sewing machine which once ran a needle through mom's finger.

Mom was born February 19, 1936 which weather records show was one of the coldest on record. The day she was born, a glass of water on the bed beside Grandma froze. No central heating. Just wood Grandpa cut. Grandpa apparently also had the 19th century belief in the benefits of fresh air and slept with the windows open in the winter. They sometimes kept a heated iron under the covers. I still have some of their hand-made quilts.

Philip and Mom were both (like Grandma) valedictorians at Frankfort. More interpretation: I think she succumbed to the temptation that many parents have to try, in some sense, to live through their children. In Grandma's case I think

one form this took was driving Mom, and Philip in particular, to excel and move towards respected careers (that would reflect back on her): Mom got an education degree, and Philip started down the path to becoming a doctor.

1.6 "I wonder how the old folks are at home..."

"...I wonder if they'll miss me when I'm gone"

Philip went off to college (Bowling Green) in 1951. Mom went to the Ohio University extension in Chillicothe 54-57, then off to main campus for her final year, where she met Dad and the rest is history....

Irnle [1-OCT-1882 to 12-DEC-1954] died on the way home from church (on Mom's shoulder as she drove). He left his portion of the farm "to George [Morrison] for his lifetime, then to" Mom and Philip.

Mom came home from Newfoundland and had Mike in the hospital in Chillicothe while Dad was stationed in Newfoundland or VA Beach.

In the early sixties they transitioned to being empty-nesters. Philip and Lilian settled in Long Island, Mom and Dad in Oxford (Miami U) and then Worthington/Columbus. There were visits from the growing young families. Mark was left in custody of Grandma once as we took a trip west.

But Grandpa turned 80 in 1965, and the story goes that he could look out across the fields and see the beautiful fall leaves, but Grandma could only see the broken down picket fence. Different people. Literally, different outlooks.

She went with us on our ?1968? road trip to Newfoundland. Salt cod. salty, salty salt cod.

As a still-full-of-energy 55 year-old, the age difference was becoming a problem. They sold the farm and moved to Worthington, first in an apartment then at 369 Franklin Ct to be near us. I was able to ride my bike over "the back way" and often did.

1.7 Gee !!!, a second family.

Grandma could not sit still. She once again began baby-sitting for extra money, and wound up with a long term job at the Gee's, essentially raising a second family. Mike, Steve and Geoff Gee were almost exactly our (Mike, George, Mark's) ages and at various times the 6 of us were good friends. Eric Gee was born later. I think Geoff was in Mark's wedding. Mike Gee was one of only about 20 people at Grandma's graveside service, due to the February 2003 blizzard. Geoff wound up as professional musician in the Boston area and dedicated one of his CDs to her. I have a poetry anthology Steve gave her for Christmas one year. Mr Gee was an attorney. They paid into social security for her, which enabled her to draw it in later years.

Grandpa died in 1974 after a long battle with Parkinson's disease. Mom and grandma cared for him in his last days at our house on Flint Rd. and were completely exhausted afterwards. We took a road-trip to California later that year to give them a break. Ironically, Grandma hired Mrs. Todd, an older black lady, to care for Grandpa some of the time she worked at the Gees.

The nest became un-empty twice. Beth Morrison (Denton) lived with her while attending Ohio State 78-82, and I lived there for about a year before our marriage in 87.

1.8 1990s and 90

She continued her lifelong calling of caring for others, doing somewhat regular sitting for Steve Hill, the "differently-abled" (e.g. "retarded", with no pejorative intent) son of an older couple in Worthington who, themselves, needed a night out as a break. I recall her talking about the Hills efforts to make arrangements for his care after they were gone. Life.

I don't remember too many details, but one night when she was at 8080 Flint (sick?) she said she had a vision of an angel appear while sleeping in the room that Grandpa had died in (Mark's room). There may be an account of it in my archives.

In 2000 we had a large birthday party for her on her 90th birthday. The entire family was there.

Mom and Dad retired, sold 8080 Flint Rd. and moved to McGregor around 1996. Grandma, then around 86, sold her house and moved in with them in an apartment in the basement. These are likely the years the great grandchildren will remember. There was an attempt at a sale, but that's not how things were done in suburbia. Much of the left-over furniture got carted to Rosedale (home of Rosedale Bible College where Daniel later attended) and may still be use. When the Realtor listed her house she put the line "Mrs. Clean Lives here." Some of her money want to buy the McGregor house.

At McGregor, there were hours of reading together on the couch, of watching Jeopardy!, and various shows/movies, playing games, cooking, etc. She was active in the "Faithful Followers" group at Orange Road Friends Church, where Mom and Dad had attended for 20+ years.

I do have Mom's narrative of her last days.

I had taken a job in Virginia. I delayed going down a week because

I had taken a job in Virginia. I delayed going down a week because she had been in the hospital. She died on February 14, 2023 13 days after I went to Virginia. I had to drive home into the face of a blizzard to get back, and got as far as Zanesville before it hit. She hated snow.

That morning, I had been having my quiet time and ended around 6, went out in the hall to go down to my car, but felt the urgent need to go back in and pray more. I did so, and got a strong sense of God saying "I'm here in Virginia with you too" (See the Psalms "Where can I go from your presence. . . if I go the far side of the sea, you are there. . ."). I got the call at work about 40 minutes later, and realized that my unexplained need for more prayer happened at the time she was dying. To quote Neil Young "There's more to the picture, than meets the eye. . ."

For the early part of her life, she had very little to call her own. Part of her response was to work hard at the things she did to, I think, try to prove herself. That stuck with her much of her life. So did resentments that started with her

fathers absence at birth, her mother's favoring of "the boys", and differences with Grandpa.

Mom said that, in the last week or two of her life, she seemed to find a way to let it go and be at peace. I need to re-read Mom's narrative of that time. I think we all carry more worries than we need to.

Just as I am, though tossed about with many a conflict, many a doubt, fightings and fears within, without, O Lamb of God, I come, I come.

P.S. I also have a copy of the autobiography she wrote for her Grandchildren. Lots of poetry.

2 Timeline

TIMELINE

WHEN	WHAT	TYPE	WHERE
1910	Born	Life Event	Near Jeffersonville, Ohio
1929	Valedictorian, Frankfort HS	Education	Frankfort, Ohio
1929	Housekeeping for Morrisons	Financial	Morrison Farm
1929	Freshman, Wilmington College	Education	Wilmington, Ohio
1929	Married	Life Event	Maysville, Ky
1933	Child Born	Life Event	Farm. Union Twp, Ross Co., OH
1936	Child Born	Life Event	Farm. Union Twp, Ross Co., OH
1950s?	Father dies	Life Event	
1962?	Mother dies	Life Event	
1968	Sold Farm, bought house?	Financial	369 Franklin Ct., Worthington
1968	Moves to Worthington	Move	Apartment
1960-1990s	Housekeeping, "Baby"sitting	Financial	Worthington
1970s-1980s	Housekeeping, raised Gee boys , paid SS	Financial	Worthington
1996?	Sold House, Moved in with Mom,Dad	Financial, Move	McGregor
2003	Died	Life Event	McGregor, Worthington, Ohio

3 Archive Info

Digital archive: <https://archive.org/details/2003morrisonestherfree-biography>

Source repository: https://github.com/eludom/family_stories/

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